

INDEPENDENT
SCHOOLS
AUSTRALIA



IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR ALL:

LEADING REFORM
THROUGH INNOVATION

APRIL 2024



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Independent Schools Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognises continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay respect to Elders past and present, and commit to the ongoing journey of reconciliation.

Cover photography courtesy of Bethany Christian School, SA, and Hymba Yumba School, QLD.



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April 2024



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Australian governments are currently developing the reform priorities for the next National School Reform Agreement (NSRA), now known as the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (BFSA) which will commence in 2025. Education Ministers have identified three priority areas for reform for the next national agreement: equity, wellbeing and workforce.

Independent Schools Australia (ISA) supports the articulation of a national policy agenda that improves outcomes for all Australian students by driving national improvement and reform. The development and implementation of agreed reform directions for school education must draw on the experiences and consider the contexts of all three school education sectors: government, Catholic and Independent.

This Report discusses three proposed priority areas of equity, wellbeing and workforce identified in the Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Report, *Improving outcomes for all* (Review Report).¹

Case Studies from ten Independent schools are featured which support the reform directions and have potential for sharing and scaling so every student and educator can benefit. The Case Studies reflect the diversity of the Independent sector and have broad applicability across sectors and schools.

¹ Expert Panel, 2023 – *Improving Outcomes for All*



The Independent sector includes ISA, Associations of Independent Schools (AISs), and individual Independent schools. Together the sector has the capacity to contribute to the development of reform initiatives, and to finding and being part of solutions. Independent schools have a level of autonomy that gives them the freedom to respond to the needs of their students, staff and school community. They are often early adopters of new technologies and their autonomous nature allows them to innovate using evidence-informed practice to improve outcomes for students in a range of contexts.

Independent schools are supported in researching, adopting and implementing innovation in key areas of schooling by the AISs in each state and territory. AISs play a vital role in supporting their member schools with evidence-based and evidence-informed practice, programs and professional development to support innovation and implement national reform.

Independent schools serve many students in Australia experiencing disadvantage and make a major contribution to the education of students from the priority equity cohorts identified in the Review Report. Challenges exist, for example, in identifying effective teaching pedagogy to engage First Nations students and improve learning outcomes.²

Case studies from Hymba Yumba School and Nawarddeen Academy demonstrate successful approaches to supporting First Nations student engagement and learning through culturally responsive teaching practices.

Personalised learning and the implementation of targeted support, data-driven interventions and parent engagement are key practices in the Independent sector.

Independent schools recognise the importance of student and educator wellbeing and implement wellbeing programs ranging from school-wide approaches to one-to-one intervention for the most vulnerable students.

The Independent school sector is actively engaged in promoting evidence-based strategies and initiatives to address teacher workload, attraction and retention, particularly in regional and remote areas.

Supporting and mentoring Initial Teacher Education students to future-proof the teaching workforce is one priority and Shearwater, The Mullumbimby Steiner School Case Study provides an excellent example of the success of the Association of Independent Schools NSW (AISNSW) Teaching School Hubs program.

2 [How ready are Australian schools to help First Nations children to succeed at school?, Monash Education](#)



2

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS AUSTRALIA



Independent Schools Australia is the national peak body and voice for the Independent school sector. Our membership comprises state and territory Associations of Independent Schools. We work closely with our members to promote choice, diversity and partnership in education, and advocate for ongoing and sustainable levels of Australian Government support through effective policy and fair funding.



Through its member Associations, ISA represents more than 1,215 schools and 716,000 students, accounting for 17.6 per cent of Australian school enrolments, and a workforce of 123,000 people.

ABOUT THE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL SECTOR

Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a range of different communities. Many Independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a specific educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. A number of Independent schools have been established by community groups seeking to meet particular needs of a community. Independent Catholic schools are a significant part of the sector, accounting for seven per cent of the Independent sector's enrolments.

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS INCLUDE:

- Schools affiliated with Christian denominations, such as Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Uniting Church, Quaker and Seventh Day Adventist schools
- Non-denominational Christian schools
- Islamic schools
- Jewish schools
- Montessori schools
- Rudolf Steiner schools
- Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as grammar schools in some states
- Community schools
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community schools
- Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities
- Schools that cater for students at severe educational risk due to a range of social/emotional/behavioural and other factors.

The latest available data shows that more than one in six Australian school students attend an Independent school, with more than one in five secondary students attending an Independent school. Students at Independent schools reflect the full diversity of Australian society – including those who experience one or multiple forms of disadvantage. The growth of enrolments in the Independent sector is most notable in low-fee Independent schools.

Most families with children enrolled in non-government schools are middle- to low-income earners, increasingly from multicultural backgrounds, and residing in outer-suburban and inner-suburban communities. Many of these families are facing severe economic stress and are making substantial sacrifices for their children's education.

Most Independent schools are established and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some Independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, such as Lutheran schools. These systemic schools account for 17 per cent of schools in the Independent sector. More than four out of five, however, are autonomous non-systemic Independent schools.



The Independent sector encompasses considerable diversity in size, location and the types of students in schools. There is a far greater percentage of Independent schools charging less than \$1,000 per year, including those that charge no fees, than those charging over \$25,000.

The median fee for an Independent school in 2022 was approximately \$5,500, and the majority of Independent schools charge annual fees of less than \$6,000.

Independent schools make a valuable contribution to education in Australia. They are long-established partners in Australia's education system, alongside government and Catholic schools, contributing to society and the learning and wellbeing of Australian children.

Independent schools are committed to playing their part in improving educational opportunities for young Australians and contributing to a robust and successful national schooling system. They play an important role in educating student cohorts experiencing disadvantage, including those most at risk of permanently disengaging from the education system.

Independent schools support families and students in a wide range of communities, and many students from regional and remote Australia are educated in settings

that are distinctive to the Independent sector, such as boarding schools and Majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools.

Independent Special Assistance Schools play a critical role in educating students unable to access mainstream schools due to complex barriers. They transform young people's lives by facilitating flexible pathways to employment or further education outcomes.

The 2023 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data shows that enrolments in the Independent sector rose by 3.9 per cent in 2023. According to the ABS in 2023, Independent school student numbers grew by 25,304 students to 666,154 full-time equivalent (FTE) students. This compares to enrolment growth over the same period of 1.4 per cent in the Catholic sector and 0.3 per cent in the government sector.³

3 Data on government and non-government students, staff and schools, www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release





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INTRODUCTION

BETTER AND FAIRER SCHOOLS AGREEMENT

This Report discusses ways that Independent schools are developing approaches to address the three key priority areas identified in the Expert Panel's Review Report: equity, wellbeing and workforce. The included Case Studies highlight innovative practice in these areas based on evidence-based and evidence-informed practice and action research to improve student outcomes.

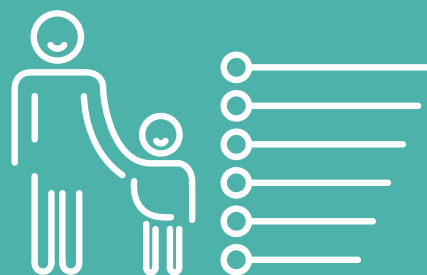
The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (BFSA) will be a joint agreement between the Commonwealth, states and territories to lift student outcomes across Australian schools. The current National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA) will conclude on 31 December 2024, with the BFSA to be finalised mid-2024 for implementation in 2025.

In 2022, the Productivity Commission undertook a review of the current NSRA. Their Final Report was released January 2023, examining the Australian and state/territory governments' national policy initiatives and how well they achieved the objectives and outcomes set out in the NSRA, making recommendations to inform the design of a new national agreement.

The Productivity Commission recommended redesigning the NSRA to focus more attention on lifting academic results for all students, supporting quality teaching and school leadership, and promoting student wellbeing.

In March 2023, the Hon Jason Clare MP, Minister for Education, announced an Expert Panel Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System (the Review)⁴ to advise on priority areas for reform that should be included in the new BFSA. ISA's submission to the Expert Panel in response to the Review's Consultation Paper is summarised in the Appendix.

⁴ [Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Reports, Department of Education, Australian Government](#)



THE REVIEW REPORT WAS RELEASED IN DECEMBER 2023 AND IDENTIFIES SEVEN REFORM DIRECTIONS:

- 1 Lift student outcomes.
- 2 Improve equity.
- 3 Improve student wellbeing.
- 4 Attract and retain teachers.
- 5 Reduce data gaps and limitations.
- 6 Enhance funding transparency and accountability.
- 7 Support innovation and achieve reform.



THE EXPERT PANEL HIGHLIGHTED THREE PRIORITY AREAS FOR REFORM FOR THE NEXT BFSA:

Equity

to improve outcomes and address student needs, especially for priority equity cohorts, and reduce concentrations of disadvantage in schools

Wellbeing

to ensure all students and staff feel supported and belong

Workforce

to grow and diversify the workforce of confident and capable teachers and other educators, and ensure they are well supported to strengthen their practice and collaborate.

The Review Report acknowledges that there is already significant investment in many of these areas from governments, school systems and schools. The Expert Panel highlighted the many good practices they witnessed in their school visits and the school-based submissions they received.

The Review Report recommends that sharing and scaling these practices so that every student and every educator can benefit is the critical work of the next stage of reform.

“

The Panel recognised that new investment would need to be accompanied by ongoing evidence-informed education reform. Everyone involved in schools will need to be involved, most notably principals and teachers, whose commitment needs to be supported, including through the development of the next generation of educators to meet growing workforce needs. Success will also require reform, simplification and renewal of systems and implementation mechanisms that underpin the provision of effective schooling. Part of this work will centre on enabling best practice and strong partnerships to be systematically applied over the life of the next Agreement.⁵

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⁵ [Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Reports, Department of Education, Australian Government](#); 2023 p 8



This Report has been developed to share practices that are improving student outcomes in individual Independent schools. As Independent schools are not systemic, sharing practice to support effective policy change can be challenging.

The Stanford Accelerator for Learning is an interdisciplinary hub for researchers, educators, entrepreneurs and others to collaborate on education learning solutions. Their initiative, 'Systems change for advancing learning and equity' (SCALE), states that key strategies to implement effective education interventions at scale are to engage and connect stakeholders, generate and test interventions and disseminate knowledge and solutions at scale to effect policy change.⁶

This Report forms part of the national conversation to support the reform agenda by sharing success stories of innovative programs in a sample of highly innovative Independent schools.

Approaches to improving teaching and learning should always be based on data and evidence collected from highly regarded international and national research. To support and deliver educational improvement, it is also imperative that solutions have flexibility and can incorporate innovative approaches. This is how data can be collected, new evidence found, student outcomes achieved, and opportunities provided for educators to lead in practice and share examples that can be leveraged by others.

A balanced approach to using current research and exploring new evidence and practice is essential if Australia is to build a Better and Fairer Education System that can continue to meet the challenges of the future and find new solutions to improve education equity and student outcomes. Creativity, innovative practice and action research provide new ways of critical thinking to meet the diverse needs of Australian students.

⁶ [Education Policy and Systems Change, Stanford Accelerator for Learning](#)

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS AND THE BFSA

The BFSA will be informed by the outcomes of the Productivity Commission Review and the Review Report. This will set out a program of reforms for all schools in all sectors which may have significant impacts on Independent schools and the families and communities they support.

Articulating a national policy agenda that drives improvement and reform will improve the outcomes of all Australian students. Improving learning outcomes requires an integrated holistic approach that considers equity, wellbeing and workforce. The development and implementation of agreed reform directions for school education must draw on the experiences of and consider the contexts of all three school education sectors: government, Catholic and Independent.

While appropriate funding levels are critical for improving learning outcomes for all students, there are many other factors at play. The characteristics of Independent schools, particularly their autonomy and flexibility, place them in a unique position to contribute to the development and application of school reform initiatives, concepts and approaches.

This autonomy allows Independent schools to respond quickly to the needs of their students, staff, parents and school community, allowing them to adapt to change and incorporate innovative programs and practices.



During the COVID-19 pandemic when communities were forced into lockdown, many Independent schools were able to make decisions quickly in ways that suited their own context and rapidly develop quality 'learning from home' programs.

Independent school leaders encourage innovation, responsiveness to local needs, cross-sectoral collaboration and community engagement. Independent schools are, therefore, ideally placed to trial and evaluate programs and initiatives.

Many Independent schools are early adopters of new technologies. They can respond in meaningful ways to emerging educational research and rapid technological developments such as generative Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Independent schools actively engage in action research and reflective practice, investing in professional development opportunities for their teachers. This commitment to ongoing learning can foster a culture of innovation within the school community. Specific examples of these practices in Independent schools are detailed in the Case Studies featured throughout this Report.

Independent schools value student-centred learning and seek to implement practical, sustainable practices to personalise and differentiate learning to adapt to individual students' needs, interests, and strengths. The multi-tiered system of supports⁷ approach is embedded in many Independent schools, monitoring student progress and providing targeted intervention as required. This promotes student engagement in learning and leads to better student outcomes. Independent schools value communication with their school communities and foster parent engagement to support students.⁸

Independent school leaders work closely with their governing boards to allocate resources efficiently and effectively.

They consider their school context and improvement plan, and invest strategically in facility development, educational programs and resources, new technologies and the professional development of staff.

Many Independent schools are faith-based or have a specific educational philosophy or mission that guides their practices. The focus on a vision, mission and alignment with identified core values can lead to the development of contemporary contextually based programs to provide high-quality education and prioritise pastoral care and student wellbeing approaches.

ISA commissioned research, undertaken by the Australian Council for Educational Research, *Reform challenges in school education*⁹ articulates three research-informed principles for improving educational outcomes which are consistent with the proposed future reform directions for the BFSa:

- Learning as personal: attempts to address equity tend to be group-based. Successful learning is more likely when an individual's learning needs are understood and addressed rather than inferring learners' needs from the groups to which they belong, including age or year groups, and equity groups.
- Learning as holistic: looking at learning as not just intellectual, but also emotional, social, physical, cultural and moral learning and development. It also encompasses removing the divide between knowledge and skills to recognise that all learning and every vocation depends on both theory and knowledge, and application and skills.
- Learning as developmental: recognises the cumulative nature of human learning, with prior learning providing the foundation for further learning. This is particularly important for curriculum design which should aim to progressively build more sophisticated knowledge, deeper understanding and higher levels of skills over extended periods of time.¹⁰

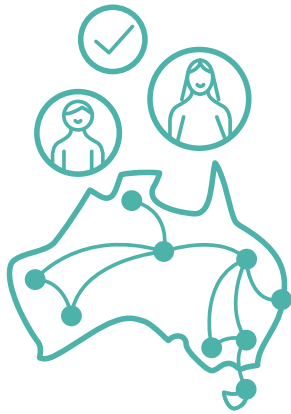
⁷ [Introduction to multi-tiered system of supports, Australian Education Research Organisation](#)

⁸ [Parent Engagement, Independent Schools Queensland](#)

⁹ [Reform Challenges in School Education, Independent Schools Australia](#)

¹⁰ Geoff Masters, Australian Council for Educational Research, 2023 – [Reform Challenges in School Education, Independent Schools Australia](#), pp 14–17

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT



A key finding of the Expert Panel's Review Report was the importance of sharing and scaling effective and innovative practices so that every student and every educator can benefit. This will be the critical work of the next stage of reform.

This Report discusses the priority reform areas identified by the Expert Panel and offers insights from ten Independent school Case Studies that explore new approaches, developed to improve student outcomes. These approaches support national reform priorities and have potential for sharing and scaling so that every student and educator can benefit. These Case Studies reflect the diversity of not only the Independent sector but the Australian education system more generally.

The Case Studies also highlight the critical role of state and territory AISs. While there are many advantages to the autonomy and flexibility of stand-alone Independent schools, they also benefit greatly from their AIS's provision of expert guidance and support, and assistance with strategies to enhance and complement school-level initiatives. AISs also develop and fund initiatives and programs for action research in Independent schools.

Collaboration between education sectors at the local and national level is an opportunity to share learnings for innovative, evidence-based approaches to meet the reform challenges of addressing disadvantage, supporting wellbeing and teacher recruitment and retention.





4

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE REFORM



OVERVIEW

The *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Consultation Paper* provided an analysis of how Australian school students are performing, and found that too many students are starting school behind their peers or are falling behind in minimum literacy and numeracy standards. The Paper's analysis showed that students from priority equity cohorts such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students living in regional, rural and remote locations, students with disability and students experiencing disadvantage are three times more likely to fall below minimum standards. If unaddressed, this gap increases over time.¹¹

The Independent sector plays a major role in educating the priority equity cohorts identified in the Review Report. Students from priority equity cohorts are over-represented among those students who fall behind in school and the Independent sector is responding to the challenge of improving outcomes for these students with multi-faceted approaches.

Schools, students, society and technology are constantly changing and continuous adaptation is necessary for effective educational reform.¹² Teacher inquiry is closely associated with evidence-based practice and practice-based research. It is student-centred and is often associated with teacher professional development, educational innovation, and school improvement.¹³



The Review Report concluded that in order to improve learning outcomes for all, the priority areas of equity, wellbeing and workforce must be the focus of evidence-based reform and innovation.

11 Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Consultation Paper, www.education.gov.au/review-inform-better-and-fairer-education-system/consultations/review-inform-better-and-fairer-education-system-consultation, 2023 p 12

12 Rowell et al, 2017. The Palgrave International Handbook of Action Research, www.researchgate.net/publication/320150258_The_Palgrave_International_Handbook_of_Action_Research

13 Brian Marsh & Mark Deacon, 10 Feb 2024. Teacher practitioner enquiry: a process for developing teacher learning and practice?, Educational Action Research, www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09650792.2024.2313085

PRIORITY AREA 1: EQUITY

EQUITY AND INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Independent schools serve many Australian students experiencing disadvantage and make a major contribution to the education of students from the priority equity cohorts identified in the Review Report:

- students experiencing disadvantage
- students with disability
- students living in regional, rural and remote locations
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Many Independent schools educate a high proportion of these students, and there are schools specifically established to meet the specific needs of priority equity student cohorts.

STUDENTS EXPERIENCING DISADVANTAGE AND DISENGAGEMENT

Many students experiencing disadvantage are taught within mainstream Independent schools and specialist settings that include:

- Special Schools
- Special Assistance Schools
- boarding schools serving regional and remote families
- Majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools, including boarding schools
- schools catering to students from different ethnic and/or cultural backgrounds including migrant and refugee families and students from non-English speaking backgrounds.



Students whose parents have a low level of income or education are often at a disadvantage in their education, and like schools in the government and Catholic sectors, many Independent schools draw a high proportion of their student enrolments from low socio-educational backgrounds.

Families with incomes in Australia's lowest income quartile make up 17 per cent of Independent school enrolments. Around 16 per cent of parents whose children attend Independent schools have a maximum educational qualification of Year 12 or below. Locality can also be a measure of educational disadvantage for students, with research showing that students in more regional and remote locations may have poorer education outcomes.¹⁴

The Independent sector is making a significant and growing contribution to addressing educational disadvantage through its Special Assistance Schools. These schools support students who have disengaged from education for a variety of reasons. These include difficult life circumstances or trauma, poverty, bullying, domestic violence, drug abuse issues, mental health issues, homelessness, school refusal or inability to manage in a mainstream school environment for any reason. Students are often referred from community services, juvenile justice and other schools – both government and non-government. A large proportion of Independent Special Assistance Schools reported that either most or all of the young people enrolled at their school have a disability.

Many Independent Special Assistance Schools are full-service schools providing basic needs such as critical dental, medical or housing assistance, childcare for young parents, or support for students to obtain a driver's licence, a birth certificate, or to access mental health care.

¹⁴ [Educational Disadvantage in Regional and Rural Schools, Australian Council for Educational Research](#)





Growth in enrolments in Independent Special Assistance Schools over the nine years 2014 to 2023 was 364 per cent (12,210 students), compared to 24 per cent growth in mainstream Independent schools.

Independent Special Assistance Schools
364% Enrolment growth

Mainstream Independent schools
24% Enrolment growth

Over the same period, the number of Special Assistance Schools increased from 48 in 2014 to 96 in 2023, with Special Assistance Schools located in each state and territory except the Northern Territory.

Total number of Special Assistance Schools
48 Schools 2014

96 Schools 2023

These growth rates indicate the strong demand for Independent Special Assistance Schools to provide young people experiencing educational disadvantage with an opportunity to continue their education and complete school. By completing their secondary education, students have the best opportunity to go on to lead productive and meaningful lives.

CASE STUDY FINDING THE RIGHT FIT

THE PORT SCHOOL, HAMILTON HILL, WA



SUMMARY

The Port School is located at Hamilton Hill, a quiet suburb 22 km south of Perth. The school reengages at-risk students who have not been able to succeed in mainstream school settings. Students at Port School are successful because every student receives tailored and targeted support with provision of wrap-around community and health services. Transition to further study or employment is provided to ensure success.

In WA, Special Assistance Schools are called CARE (Curriculum and Reengagement in Education) Schools and this sums up what happens at Port School. They deeply care about each and every student, acknowledging the difficult and traumatic time that these young people have experienced.

Their vision is to provide a safe, nurturing and supportive environment where students are given a new chance to learn and build self-confidence. Empowerment, diversity, growth and community are all-encompassing school values embedded in the school's culture and programs.

Port School aims to find the 'right fit' option for every student that journeys through the school. Success is defined as personal success, tailored to each individual. Principal Barry Finch received a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 2022 for services to education and at-risk youth. His calm, pragmatic, relational but no-nonsense leadership style has served the school since 2001, first as a teacher and then as principal. As Barry walks around the school, students seek him out to ask his advice, to ask him to solve a problem or simply to check in.

Port School caters for the majority of their students onsite but also provides targeted specific offsite programs for those with greater needs and extreme life challenges. Both approaches aim to prepare all their students for success and life beyond school.

WRAP-AROUND CARE

At Port School, wrap-around care means anything and everything, depending on each student's needs. This might range from subsidising or paying for dental assistance or glasses to paying for a gym membership if deemed essential to a student's mental health. Each student has an individual education or support plan to eliminate barriers to learning, enable them to experience success or provide opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach, such as a pre-driver program. Classroom size is ten students or less, always with two staff in attendance.



“ They are survivors; it’s amazing they come every day.

Barry Finch, *Principal*

”

UNIQUE PROGRAMS

Port School provides academic and vocational pathways outside the Western Australia Certificate of Education. The school is a Registered Training Organisation and students may study Certificate II and III in General Education for Adults and choose from 11 other VET courses, with support for transition into tertiary study, apprenticeships, traineeships or the workforce. A feature of Port School is that Year 8 and 9 students complete all general classes with the same teachers and education assistants who cover the entire curriculum, similar to a primary school environment.

There is a strong focus on explicit direct instruction which improves participation and engagement, as concepts taught are checked for understanding multiple times throughout a lesson so that mastery is gained before moving on to a new concept. Teachers report that often this is the first time a student has actually experienced success and not feel they have been left behind.

The Mobile Classroom is an offsite program for young people who struggle to engage with the school environment. Two staff, usually a teacher and youth worker, drive the bus to meet students in and around Fremantle and Perth, teaching a maximum of five

students in parks, at the beach or in familiar community areas. Staff build positive rapport and trust to create a space where the most disenfranchised students feel they belong.

The Outreach Program is another offsite program providing one-on-one support for long-term disengaged students. These young people may live in residential care, have extreme anxiety or be at risk of suicide. The program is staffed by male and female youth workers, counsellors and teachers, using community spaces such as libraries, youth centres or other public places. If the student is unable to transition back to school, they may remain in this program until they graduate.

The Port Young Parent Centre is an education program for teenage mums (pregnant or parenting). They receive parent education and support to complete their education, with their children next door in the early learning centre operated by the school.

Year 13 is an option for students not quite ready to leave school. They are expected to contribute to the community and take on a leadership role whilst completing an agreed vocational course.

CASE STUDY FOSTERING INDEPENDENT THINKING

BETHANY CHRISTIAN SCHOOL, PARALOWIE, SA



SUMMARY

Bethany Christian School (BCS) is located in a low socio-economic area in Paralowie, in the northern suburbs of Adelaide. After working with a number of high-profile global thought leaders in education, BCS has become a leader in the application of student agency. To support this, the school also has a strong focus on teacher professional learning and engagement, with all of the leadership team completing their Masters in Educational Leadership.

BCS enrolls 600 students and for more than 45 per cent of students, English is their second language and more than a third have a disability.

Principal Wendy Matear ensures there is a strong strategic focus on student learning, staff and student agency, leadership, community wellbeing and teacher capacity. The school's philosophy of creative thinking, learning design and personalised learning has influenced the design and purpose of new buildings and learning spaces.

STUDENT AGENCY

The OECD brief on Student Agency for 2030¹⁵ defines student agency as the capacity to set goals, and to reflect and act responsibly to effect change. When foundational skills and knowledge are in place, students can play an active role in deciding what and how they will learn. They can also show greater motivation to learn and the ability to define and set learning goals. Upon meeting BCS students, it can be hard to remember that this is a primary school, as students are self-motivated, independent, creative, eager learners, with a confidence and maturity that surpasses their years.

At BCS, student agency skills commence from the early years, linked to school values, their wellbeing program and student leadership program so that by the time students reach Year 6, they have a repertoire of leadership skills to apply. Students co-create curriculum with teachers, provide input into assessment rubrics, and self-reflect on their own learning. So how did the school start this journey?

Wendy researched national and global educational approaches to identify best practice in student leadership and learning agency.

15 Student Agency OECD – [in_brief_Student_Agency.pdf](#)
[Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#)



An excellent opportunity arose in 2016 when the Association of Independent Schools SA (AISSA) offered ten AISSA schools the chance to be part of a Design Thinking project and to work with internationally renowned thought leader Professor Yong Zhao.¹⁶ The project would explore possibilities and challenges in creating schools to build future thinkers and innovators. BCS was keen to be involved. From 2016 to 2019, BCS students and staff were led by Professor Zhao to develop an action research project to promote student entrepreneurship. Students and staff worked alongside Zhao, developing a student media team and creating their own movies and website.

The Design Thinking project led to a better understanding of what conditions support personalised education, increase student participation and develop entrepreneurship.¹⁷ This work culminated in AISSA and the South Australian Secondary Principals' Association (SASPA) co-hosting the 2019 Paradigm Shifters Learning Symposium to showcase school achievements. But this was only the beginning.

The next thought leader to work with BCS staff and students through the AISSA project was Charles Leadbeater¹⁸ (2019 to 2022) with his Student Agency Lab project. Leadbeater is an international authority on innovation and creativity and an expert on student agency. He is advisor to the UK Department for Education's Innovation Unit on future strategies for networked and personalised approaches to learning and education, and lead adviser for the OECD Future of Education and Skills Framework 2030.¹⁹ The Student Agency Lab project aimed to develop robust theory and practice for student agency that can be widely shared among schools.

The third stage of the AISSA project, Meta-Praxis, is in progress (2022 – current), being led by Michael Bunce from the University of East London,²⁰ looking at how learning impact rather than progress can be measured. This project involves students, teachers and school leaders exploring a variety of approaches to create learning environments that enable the development of learner agency, cognitive skills, creative and critical thinking, and personal and social capabilities.

16 Yong Zhao – [Education in the Age of Globalization](#), Zhao Learning

17 [Paradigm Shifters Learning Symposium](#), Association of Independent Schools of South Australia

18 Charles Leadbeater – [Charles Leadbeater](#)

19 OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 – [OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030](#), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

20 Michael Bunce – [Leading Education Series 7](#), Centre for Strategic Education, Centre for Strategic Education



“ I love doing stuff without help, especially when its big!

Year 4 student

Students should emerge from their schooling as purposeful, reflective responsible agents, investing themselves actively to achieve goals they devise and endorse to shape the future for the better.

Charles Leadbeater, [Student Agency Lab](#)

”

With continued AISSA support, Wendy participated in a study tour in the US and New Mexico, learning how low socio-economic schools work with Indigenous groups, support student learning and develop student-led structures. Upon her return Wendy decided that staff would benefit from professional development in learning design thinking and BCS tailored a program with an external company to enact this goal.

LEADERSHIP AND STAFF

The importance of effective school leadership when embarking on innovative programs cannot be understated. BCS has a united, strong leadership team and all have completed their Masters in Educational Leadership. Wendy hones the strengths and interests of each staff member to benefit students. She utilises their natural gifts and provides them with opportunities to shine. They do not have a teacher retention problem at BCS. Staff love to work there. Consistency and growing together lies at the core of their approach.

Wendy does not necessarily accept that where staff are at is where they will stay. With a smile she says she encourages ongoing learning with 'gentle pressure, relentlessly applied'.

When asked what challenges the school encountered in embarking on these innovative projects with global thought leaders in education, Wendy remarked that selecting key staff was important. One teacher, Nathan, was strategically chosen to be involved from the start, because he was analytical and asked rigorous questions. Wendy didn't want a teacher who would be easily won over.

Nathan involved himself deeply in thinking and learning about the projects and realised they were not in fact projects or programs, but rather a learning philosophy. He is now one of the school's biggest advocates. Nathan stated, 'Students know themselves, we just need to let them have opportunities to show us what they are thinking'.



STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY

The Independent sector educates an estimated 155,200 students with disability, representing more than a fifth of Independent sector enrolments.

The overwhelming majority of these students with disability are educated in Independent mainstream schools, many employing specialist teachers to work with class teachers and parents to develop individual learning programs. They develop strategies and materials to ensure inclusive environments and meet the needs of students of all abilities. Many schools employ teacher aides to work one-on-one with students during class as well as utilising a range of other adjustments.

It is important that parents and students can choose the educational environment that best meets their learning needs. Over ten per cent of students with disability in Independent schools attend a Special School, which caters solely for students with a disability, and most Special Schools are Independent schools. Parents choose Special Schools for their ability to provide specialised adjustments for their child's specific needs. This includes students who have been assessed as requiring extensive adjustments under the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability.

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS

There are currently 19,300 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in 987 Independent schools. Enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Independent schools have grown at an average annual rate of over six per cent per year over the last decade.

There are 45 Independent schools where the majority of students are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and 29 schools dedicated entirely to this cohort of students. There are 13 Independent schools serving remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where the Independent school is the only educational option for students in that community.

The Independent sector makes a major contribution to educating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on Country. For example, in remote Western Australia there are 14 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Independent Community Schools. They are located in the Kimberley, Pilbara, Murchison, Goldfields and Great Southern area. Each of these community schools belongs to the community it serves and has an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governing body.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from regional and remote communities are amongst the most educationally disadvantaged in Australia. For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students living in remote communities there is limited access to primary school education, and often no access to secondary education.

The Independent school sector is the major provider of boarding school education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, including for those students who cannot access schooling in their community and for whom boarding is the only option.

In 2023, there were 2,335 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders in the Independent sector, representing 15 per cent of all Independent boarding school enrolments. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders attend over 120 Independent boarding schools. In 2023, there were seven Independent boarding schools that only enrol Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Independent boarding schools serve students and families with limited or no capacity to contribute to the costs of their children's educational and boarding needs. Government funding, including ABSTUDY payments, plays a central role in funding these services. Between 2014 and 2023, there was an approximate 12 per cent growth in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders.

Monash University notes that there is a lack of research into what a culturally responsive pedagogy might look like in Australia. The main issue is the lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in developing such pedagogies.

It also states there are challenges in identifying effective teaching frameworks that can be applied more broadly in both urban and rural areas.²¹

Hymba Yumba School and Nawarddeken Academy prioritise the embedding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content and culture throughout their curriculum, relying on Elders, Traditional Custodians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge holders to inform their pedagogy. These Case Studies show what can be achieved to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student engagement and learning in both urban and remote settings.

REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE STUDENTS

There are 412 Independent schools located in regional and remote areas, enrolling 140,350 students and employing over 19,600 teachers and other staff. There are 42 Independent schools located in remote or very remote areas, with 33 located in Western Australia and the Northern Territory.



This equates to 30 per cent of all Independent schools being in regional areas, and three per cent in remote areas. Independent schools located in regional and remote areas tend to be smaller, and half of these schools have enrolments of fewer than 200 students.

Schools in regional and remote areas face significant challenges in the delivery of education due to geography and associated disadvantage. These range from the increased costs of staffing, transport, and ICT through to the delivery of the curriculum, the diversity of available subject choice and the provision of school visits to cultural and other institutions which would be taken for granted in metropolitan schools. Attracting and retaining teachers is a significant challenge for regional and remote schools. The socio-educational profile of schools in regional and remote areas is also on average lower than metropolitan schools.

For students from regional, rural and remote backgrounds, the Independent school sector is the largest provider of boarding in Australia, operating almost 65 per cent of all Australian boarding schools. Almost three-quarters of all Independent boarding students are from rural locations, with 15 per cent of Independent boarding school enrolments being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

²¹ [How ready are Australian schools to help First Nations children to succeed at school?](#), Monash Education



CASE STUDY LEARNING THROUGH CULTURE

HYMBA YUMBA, SPRINGFIELD, QLD



SUMMARY

Hymba Yumba Independent School is a First Nations school located in Springfield, a suburb of Ipswich west of Brisbane. The school's focus is on improving student outcomes in literacy and numeracy, attendance and post-school options through a strong focus on First Nations culture and community, student agency and wellbeing.

Hymba Yumba Independent School is a vibrant school educating close to 290 First Nations 'jarjums', or young people, from Preparatory to Year 12. The school is located in Springfield, on the traditional land of the Jagera, Yuggera, and Ugarapul people in South-East Queensland. The school recently transitioned to a CEO model with former Board member Karla Brady taking on the role.

Hymba Yumba has a strong focus on First Nations culture and community in all areas – from learning and curriculum through to student agency and wellbeing. Karla also has a strong focus on addressing the marginalisation still experienced by First Nations people in many urban areas.

The school aims to provide transformative First Nations education and is focused on improving student outcomes across a wide range of areas including literacy and numeracy, attendance, and Year 13 pathways. The school has a partnership with a Registered Training Organisation offering a Certificate III in Community Service that is available to parents. The school is also engaged in partnerships with other schools to help improve student outcomes in specific areas, including an online partnership focusing on maths with Jubilee Christian College.

While the school has space limitations, there are plans underway to add a new building for arts/dance/radio and digital technology. Going forward Hymba Yumba will prioritise STEAM (science, technology, engineering, the arts and mathematics) developing jarjum into blerds (black nerds).

COMMUNITY, CULTURE AND WELLBEING

Being an urban community, many of the First Nations families that attend Hymba Yumba have no connection to the land where the school is located. The importance of involving local Elders of the Country in every aspect of the school is made very clear through everyday activities that the local Elders, Aunties and Uncles contribute to and participate in at the school – from school lunches through to helping with students with language and skills development. This engagement also reminds students that while they are visitors, the local Elders give them permission to care for this Country.



Hymba Yumba prides itself on the weaving of cultural significance and knowledge within the whole school makeup. The emphasis at Hymba Yumba of engaging in all aspects of their education and life at school through the lens of culture assists students to discover and understand their own identities as well as solidly orienting them in their First Nations identities.

The school holds Bunji (meaning brother) and Tidda (meaning sister) groups to support, encourage and inspire the jarjum. The Bunji program provides an environment for male role models to support, encourage and provide cultural guidance. It captures traditional protocols and practices to enhance ownership and leadership qualities to the jarjum and the group. First Nations peoples' spirituality, culture and identity are woven throughout the Bunji program. The program provides high-level personal support and development and creates stronger readiness for school, through established Indigenous Education Workers and specialist Teacher Leads in Wellbeing, Culture and Learning Support.

The Tidda program is designed to inspire and motivate Year 7–12 girls to be resilient, independent leaders and have a strong sense of their identity as well as holistic health and wellbeing. The program aims to improve relationships between the Year 7–12 tiddas as well as encouraging older tiddas to be leaders for younger tiddas at school, at home and in the community.

Hymba Yumba strongly emphasises First Nations culture through artistic expression, with a particular focus on visual arts and cultural dance. The school buildings are a visual statement of the link to culture with murals painted by First Nations artists, and student and community art is displayed throughout the school.

Jarjum at Hymba Yumba are involved in cultural dance, enabling them to experience cultural practices that have been used for thousands of years, as they explore the stories, techniques and protocols surrounding traditional dance. Exploring the many different cultural dances of Australia enables the jarjum to gain appreciation and awareness of the large variety of cultural dances practised throughout Indigenous Australia.

Hymba Yumba jarjum have agency and voice through cultural protocols. Staff, students, parents and community members regularly meet in a yarning circle and use a message stick to discuss a wide range of issues. In the yarning circle everyone is equal and everyone is listened to without interruption. The circle provides a safe space for everyone to voice their concerns and share any challenges they are facing. All individuals have the opportunity to speak their minds and be heard.



THERAPY DOGS

Another unique aspect of Hymba Yumba are the three therapy dogs who move between the Junior and Senior School classes having a positive impact on learning and wellbeing. Each dog has a staff handler and senior students can train to become secondary handlers. The senior jarjum also have the opportunity to complete a Petbarn traineeship or a Certificate II in Animal Studies, creating career and pathway opportunities, including veterinary studies.

LEARNING SUPPORT AND CURRICULUM

Culture is also woven throughout the school curriculum and approaches to learning. Cultural lessons take place twice a week in all the classrooms. Last semester jarjum learnt about First Nations 'unsung heroes', such as footballer Jonathan Thurston, and then they were able to take their learning to utilise learning tools, like the Writers Toolbox, and write about what they had learnt.

In the previous semester the focus of the cultural lessons was on the '4 Respects' which underpin learning at Hymba Yumba – respect for myself, respect for family, respect for my community and respect for Country.

Both Karla and Head of Primary School, Jess Endean, are passionate about embedding First Nations knowledge and perspectives into the curriculum. The school begins with First Nations ways of being, knowing and doing and then 'flips' the Australian Curriculum to align firstly with First Nations perspectives.

“ It is the responsibility of every teacher to educate and immerse themselves in authentic First Nations stories. This enables us to contribute to a world where not only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander jarjum see themselves in our daily curriculum, but non-First Nations students see someone other than themselves as the hero and learn the value in understanding different perspectives. ‘Flipping’ the curriculum in this way to suit the jarjum can bring greater engagement for students as it focuses on what’s important for them, both in the Australian context and globally. ”

CASE STUDY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH COUNTRY

NAWARDDEKEN ACADEMY, REMOTE WEST ARNHEM LAND, NT



SUMMARY

Nawarddeken Academy is located in the Warddeken Indigenous Protected Area and was established at the request of local Indigenous Elders, who wanted their children to be able to access full-time education in their home communities. Nawarddeken Academy offers a unique model of bicultural, community-driven education, working with community to ensure that Bininj (Indigenous) and Balanda (non-Indigenous) learning is combined in a holistic, relevant way so that young people have the knowledge, skills and confidence to make good life choices and be able to walk in two worlds.

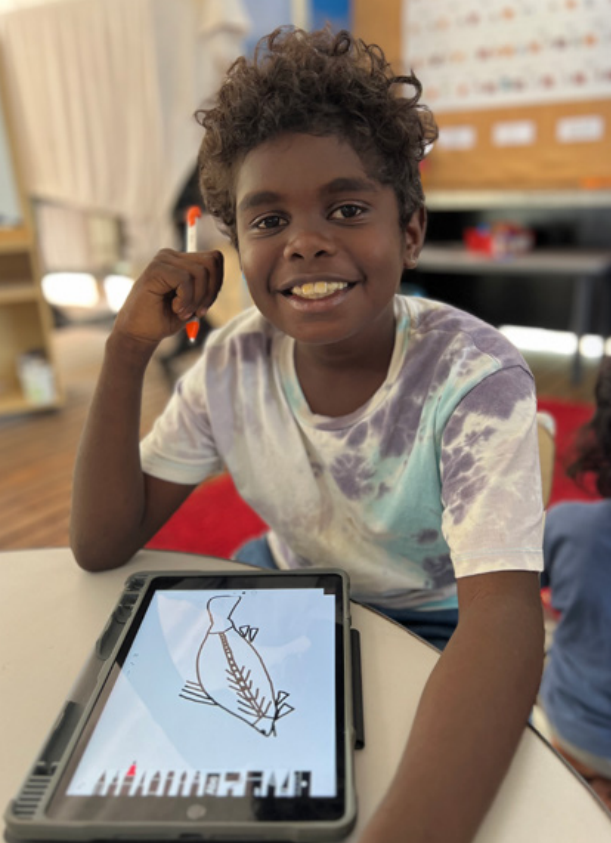
Elders of the Warddeken Indigenous Protected Area had long held a vision of delivering a unique model of bi-cultural education in the Kuwarddewardde (Stone Country), on the West Arnhem Land plateau.

Starting in 2014, Elders and community members held conversations, consultations and workshops to design the vision, objectives and guiding principles for delivering bicultural education on Country. With the generous financial support of the Karrkad Kanjdji Trust, Nawarddeken Academy was established and commenced teaching at Kabulwarnamyo school under the auspices of Gunbalanya School. In 2019 Kabulwarnamyo obtained Independent school registration, with the Manmoyi and Mamadawerre schools receiving registration in late 2021.²²

In the early 2000s, Wardekken Land Management rangers established the world's first fire and carbon offsets program, the West Arnhem Land Fire Agreement and through this program, Nawarddeken Traditional Owners have been able to live and work on Country. The rangers were keen to have local schools for their children as the nearest schools were between 1.5 and three hours away in the dry season and inaccessible in the wet.

After decades of waiting, the innovative establishment of these three campuses has proven a game changer, as more families can return to Country and children can attend their local school, learning through a culturally created curriculum. Their key to success has been ongoing collaboration with Elders, Traditional Custodians, Indigenous knowledge holders and rangers to build a sustainable bicultural program. Attendance rates are relatively high and children are fully engaged.

22 Nawarddeken Academy Annual Report 2022 – nawarddeken.org.au/files/ugd/75b820_50a9f4ec85d-6452cac7fe63b4c8215e5.pdf



When in community, student 2023 attendance rates were Manmoyi 79 per cent, Mamadawerre 87 per cent and Kabulwarnamyo 92 per cent.

Nawarddeken Academy works with community to ensure that Biniŋj (Indigenous) and Balanda (non-Indigenous) learning is combined in a holistic, relevant way so that young people have the knowledge, skills and confidence to make good life choices and be able to walk in two worlds. This vision is supported by clear objectives:

- Support the social, cultural, emotional and physical wellbeing of every child.
- Promote intergenerational education where families and communities share learning experiences to conserve Indigenous knowledge, languages and landscapes.
- Empower young people to be strong and confident in Western and Indigenous knowledge systems.
- Preserve Nawarddeken languages and culture through bilingual and bicultural experiential learning.
- Develop clear pathways for young Indigenous people of West Arnhem Land that match their aspirations and the aspirations of their families.

BICULTURAL LEARNING

To fully engage students, Nawarddeken developed their own bicultural community-driven educational approach overlaying their seasonal curriculum (Kuwarddewarrde Malkno Curriculum), with Indigenous knowledge as the core, with the Australian Curriculum. Units of work are linked to high-quality literature and lessons are relevant to what students seek to learn about Country, as well as providing a broader world view. 'Both ways' learning and powerful cultural knowledge are passed on through local Indigenous knowledge.

Students across the year levels may work together for some lessons, and in others, there is more individualised and differentiated learning. Some students have only had access to full-time education in the last two years, since Nawarddeken opened, so many students are on Individualised Learning Plans and require significant support.

With streamed approaches for small group learning and highly individualised teaching, learning outcomes are constantly improving. Literacy (with a focus on the science of reading) and numeracy approaches are unified across the three campuses so that students who may spend time in one of the other schools feel comfortable with a consistent approach.

Student agency is highly valued and students can choose activities and share their learning. Secondary students are involved with the younger students and often lead or take a small group. Secondary students attend school and are supported with distance education, although in 2024 Nawarddeken Academy will be applying to be registered as a secondary school.

TECHNOLOGY

To ensure a strong technology focus, Nawarddeken Academy worked hard to gain access to satellites, hardware and the internet so students can access global knowledge and connect to the world. Students use technology to collect local environmental data and convert that data into presentations and graphs.

Each student has their own iPad. When participating in multi-day bush walks, they are able to record sacred sites, take digital photos of rock paintings and record locations and observations. iPad apps are used as learning tools and then integrated with on-Country learning, the seasonal calendar curriculum and the Australian Curriculum.

“There are not many challenging behaviours here. It is a hub of community and learning. No western way of learning here. Everyone’s knowledge is valued, kids too. The Elders help sort out any issues and we all work together.”

Local educator

STAFF

Education staff at all three campuses are committed and flexible, and adapt to a remote environment where for six months of the year, roads are impassable. Bringing in a casual teacher is no mean feat as it requires creative planning, charter flights and complicated logistics. Nawarddeken Academy values staff wellbeing as retention is important for students to form trusting relationships. The school has also developed several wellbeing strategies valued by staff across all schools.

The strong reciprocal relationship between community and school ensures Indigenous knowledge holders can share their knowledge of Country to pass on to younger generations.

The schools have become important players in their socio-economic infrastructure, providing employment and purpose, linked to knowledge and culture. This innovative model is so successful that neighbouring Indigenous Protected Areas are seeking help from the Nawarddeken Academy Board to run similar schools in their communities. The Homeland School Company has been created through philanthropic funding and together with Nawarddeken Academy will support more community driven and designed bicultural schools to grow in remote areas.





CASE STUDY WELLBEING, SERVICE AND COMMUNITY

LAUNCESTON GRAMMAR, LAUNCESTON, TAS



SUMMARY

Launceston Grammar is an Anglican co-educational day and boarding school located in Launceston, northern Tasmania. The school has a long history of and commitment to service to the community. Launceston Grammar collects wellbeing data across the school and has identified five drivers of wellbeing which are used for the whole organisation. The school is an illustration of how a focus on whole-school wellbeing can improve the attraction and retention of staff and improve student outcomes.

Launceston Grammar is the oldest continuous day and boarding school in Australia. It is steeped in history and tradition and strongly values community, both inside and outside the school gates.

Launceston Grammar currently enrolls more than 720 students from Prep to Year 12 over two campuses.

Principal Dale Bennett commenced at the school in 2023. He was appointed after a period of significant change and has brought a strong focus on building community, staff and student wellbeing, developing the natural strengths of the school.

Being 178 years old, the school has a rich history. School alumni include significant leaders in civic and business life in Australia and internationally. Dale commented that many school alumni are 'quietly confident and unassuming' and attributed this to the school's longstanding culture of service and community commitment.

Launceston Grammar offers a balanced program as it is just as focused on the arts, outdoor education, sport and technology as they are on academic achievement. Students have many opportunities to shine and be leaders in a variety of programs. This has evolved into a supportive culture where students see each other's strengths and challenges and appreciate each other's talents. Students are proud of their service culture and senior students are committed to providing a daily breakfast program for local students experiencing disadvantage. In the primary school, Year 3 primary students visit local nursing homes and others might fundraise for a charity they are passionate about.

WELLBEING

Launceston Grammar illustrates how a focus on service, community and a whole-school wellbeing approach can improve the attraction and retention of staff. Student voice has been identified as an important platform to not only improve wellbeing but also improve student learning outcomes, providing a sense of belonging, purpose and engagement.

The success of wellbeing is dependent upon staff engagement and ownership of the culture. Their culture journey commenced in June 2022. The leadership team analysed staff feedback and research data and decided upon explicit and immediate actions the school could take.



“ Art is calming and relaxing and takes me into a different world of imagination.

Gabbi, Year 6

Altruistic service promotes positive social engagement and increases positive mental health, building capacity in all Pillars.

Reverend Matthew Pickering, [School Chaplain](#)

”

Personal notes of appreciation, giving staff permission and an expectation to switch off from emails from Friday afternoon to Monday morning, no meetings on Fridays after 3pm, morning teas, authentic staff voice and agency were just a few ways that staff felt valued, and the survey data showed a remarkable improvement in staff wellbeing over a short period of time.

Holistic development is the cornerstone of the school's approach, linked strongly to service, nurturing healthy relationships and valuing a positive strengths culture. Wellbeing data is collected at regular intervals across the school with carefully selected student survey programs. During 2023, the school explored student wellbeing through five pillars that encompass Academic, Spiritual, Psychological, Social Emotional and Physical domains. A newly appointed Director of Student Wellbeing is leading the ongoing implementation of the program based on the data across both the senior and junior campuses, working with staff to ensure that policy, practice and processes are scrutinised and reflect the core wellbeing drivers.

Launceston Grammar's drivers of wellbeing are Purpose, Engagement, Connectiveness, Agency and Perspective. These universal drivers are used for the whole organisation to explore how day-to-day activity, be it lesson plan design, recruitment processes, the staff code of conduct or even the whole school budget planning approach, reflect a strong commitment to whole community wellbeing.

STUDENT VOICE

Survey data showed what students value most about their school is 'a sense of community and belonging'. When asked what type of person they want to be, many responded they want to be kind to others. The school highly values sport and offers as many sports as possible, not just traditional team sports, although team sports are important. As some students prefer individual sports, a mountain bike track project was developed from a student-led initiative, championed with the support of the principal and the community. Students saw the project through from conception to completion resulting in a vibrant mountain biking cohort competing locally and nationally.



Sport ties in strongly with the five pillars of wellbeing. A specialist high performance mentor works with students on strength and conditioning, combined with health, nutrition and diet sessions with experts in the field. The Physical Pillar is just as important as the Academic Pillar, as sport gives students a chance to take calculated risks, to fail and to succeed. The principal is a firm believer in experiential learning and that 'wellbeing cannot be taught from a text, it must be a way of being'. He emphasised the unique and profound learning experiences gained from Outdoor Education programs in the Tasmanian wilderness.

ART AND FAITH

Artistic expression is also encompassed in the five pillars model. Head of House, Rachel Pickering, is combining the school's framework with art and faith, blending spiritual wellbeing in Christian studies, looking at self, relationships and transformation through art. Art begins in the early primary years where it is a vehicle for storytelling and empathy, connection and compassion. Primary Visual Arts teacher Martine Cook asks her students, 'What is an Artist?' From their responses she sees young children have an innate understanding that making and creating art means you can be yourself, experience beauty, have fun and feel free and that art makes you feel positive and provokes wonder, curiosity and collaboration.

While Launceston Grammar is an Anglican school, it accepts students of all faiths, backgrounds and abilities and has a diverse student population. Students attend chapel once a week and study comparative religion. This openness and acceptance has remained constant throughout the school's history. The focus on character development and strong supportive community provides the foundation to nurture, challenge and inspire confident, resilient young people and to continually improve learning outcomes for whole-of-life success. Everyone is known; everyone is accepted. Teachers respect their students, care for them, celebrate their voice and agency and enable them to do what they need to do to be successful learners.

Their wellbeing focus aligns with the curriculum and the school's commitment to service. It is not an add-on but deeply embedded and aligned with the school's purpose. What happens when you deeply integrate wellbeing into a school? You become more than a set of academic outcomes; you become a community that exists to support young people so they may positively shape the lives of others.

“ An Artist is a risk taker because they try new things even though they don't know what will happen. ”

Mia, Year 2





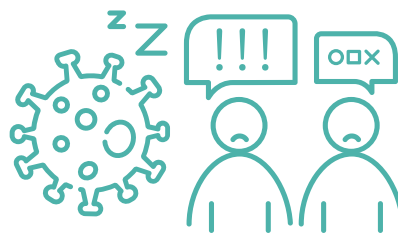
PRIORITY AREA 2: WELLBEING

WELLBEING AND INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Research shows that the complexity and incidence of poor mental health is increasing and the consequences are extremely concerning. Poor student wellbeing affects school attendance, learning and academic outcomes.²³

Student wellbeing is not distributed equally. Psychological disorder is more likely if a student:

- lives in an outer regional area
- lives in a low-income household
- self-identifies as gender non-binary
- is female (adolescent girls in particular are more likely to experience anxiety than boys or other ages) or
- is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.



Other significant stressors may include academic pressure, bullying, the COVID-19 pandemic, lack of sleep, amount of time spent online and lack of physical activity.²⁴

²³ [Students and Staff Wellbeing and Mental Health: Independent Schools Australia 2022](#), p 4

²⁴ [Students and Staff Wellbeing and Mental Health: Independent Schools Australia 2022](#), p 12

Students with a mental illness can lag academically behind their peers, with the gap increasing over time. Children with a mental disorder have progressively higher rates of absenteeism over the duration of their schooling.

In 2022, about 11 per cent of children aged 12 to 17 reported deliberately harming themselves and about 7.5 per cent reported seriously considering suicide in the previous 12 months.²⁵

Children aged 12 to 17 in the previous 12 months

11% Deliberately harmed themselves



7.4% Seriously considered suicide



Young people are increasingly disengaging from school education. One indicator of disengagement is attendance levels – that is the percentage of students who attend at least 90 per cent of the time.

A 2023 study showed that by Year 10, around 40 per cent of young people were regularly missing school prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This increased to almost 60 per cent during COVID-19.²⁶

Year 10 students

40% of students regularly missing school pre-COVID-19



60% of students regularly missing school during COVID-19



Studies show wellbeing contributes to engagement and drives student outcomes. Wellbeing programs can support and accelerate students' learning. Choosing the right wellbeing program and measuring its impact and effectiveness are important components of a whole-school community approach to wellbeing.²⁷

Schools are ideal places for children to seek support, and Independent schools prioritise wellbeing, safety and positive relationships. The Australian Student Wellbeing Framework²⁸ describes Australian schools as 'learning communities that promote students' wellbeing, safety and positive relationships so that students can reach their full potential'. Independent schools are committed to this concept.

The state and territory AISs also work with their member schools to develop and implement programs to assess and support student wellbeing. Their programs emphasise the importance of a whole-of-school approach to student wellbeing and promote the latest evidence-based wellbeing strategies and interventions.

Several Case Studies are examples of this collaboration. Independent schools recognise the importance of strong teacher workforce support and development.

As the wellbeing of school staff is closely linked with the wellbeing of students, schools are most effective at caring for students when staff themselves feel supported and well-equipped.

Independent schools have implemented a range of staff and student wellbeing programs ranging from whole-school approaches to one-to-one intervention for the most vulnerable students. These programs focus on the holistic development of students particularly in relation to wellbeing and promoting student agency and positive self-esteem, strategies to promote safe and inclusive school environments and culturally appropriate curriculum and environment.

25 [Students and Staff Wellbeing and Mental Health: Independent Schools Australia 2022](#), p 10

26 Learning Beyond Limits, Insights and learnings from visionary schools and communities working toward a fit-for-purpose learning system; Learning Creates Australia 2023, p 7

27 [Spotlight - Wellbeing in Australian Schools, AITSL 2022](#)

28 [Australian Student Wellbeing Framework, Student Wellbeing Hub](#)

CASE STUDY THE PERSONAL APPROACH

BAYVIEW COLLEGE, PORTLAND, VIC



SUMMARY

Bayview College is located in Portland, a low socio-economic area in Western Victoria. The College has approached improving outcomes and wellbeing by developing its own wellbeing program which is aligned with personalised learning and complements their academic and co-curricular programs. The College uses personalised learning to meet individual needs and to track progress and achievement utilising teacher mentors.

Bayview College's vision, 'To Believe, To Think, To Achieve, is proudly displayed in its main foyer and reflected in all teaching and learning programs, initiatives and organisational structures.

Located in Portland, a low socio-economic area, Bayview (an Ecumenical Christian College) is committed to its community, and offers a highly inclusive environment where all students are welcomed.

Bayview College educates more than 280 students from Years 7 to 12, embracing diversity and valuing individual differences. Bayview College's rich educational programs provide a strong foundation for commitment to service and social justice. Students and staff actively participate in and contribute to local, state, national and global issues.

Principal Michelle Kearney has been leading the College for 12 years and her stable leadership, vision for wellbeing and commitment to personalised learning has been unwavering. The College developed its own wellbeing program upon the imagery and meaning of their school crest,²⁹ an encompassing **Circle, with Wave, Anchor and Horizon** (median line). The wellbeing curriculum is further enhanced with the support of Independent Schools Victoria (ISV) and the Wayfinder³⁰ program – a social emotional learning curriculum developed by Stanford University's Institute of Design using the latest adolescent research. The curriculum aims to foster personal development and create a sense of belonging and community, perfectly aligning to the College's vision. ISV provides guidance and support and collates data on the Wayfinder program's success each year.

29 Bayview Crest – [Bayview Crest, Bayview College](#)

30 Wayfinder program – [Wayfinder, Independent Schools Victoria](#)



“ The school is doing something right as the students are amazing. It is the best school I have ever taught at. ”

Casual teacher, [new to the College](#)

WELLBEING ALIGNED WITH VISION

The wellbeing program for each year is designed to complement and support the academic and co-curricular program, based on respect for the dignity and uniqueness of each individual, allowing each student to thrive.

In Year 7 students participate in the *Wave* program as they are ‘riding the wave’ of transition from primary school to secondary school. The Year 7 wellbeing curriculum strengthens social emotional development based on values such as establishing good habits and learning how to resolve conflict. Students form connections to local Indigenous people and the land. Working in small groups, they create a passion project, presenting their product, outcomes and findings to the community.

The *Anchor* program is the Year 8 wellbeing program, providing opportunities for students to develop teamwork skills and a social consciousness as they participate in the development and delivery of projects within the broader community. Year 8 students are introduced to mental health first aid which is followed up in Year 10, and also participate in cyber safety and consent lessons. A strong focus on community supports their connection to school and each other. Students are encouraged to go beyond their comfort zone, set goals for the year and build positive social relationships. The College encourages and supports student voice and participation.

This was evident when Year 8 students pitched a proposal to the Principal to re-plant gardens and re-sand and re-paint their outdoor recreational tables and science room tables. As students had ownership of these activities, they were highly engaged and proud of their achievements.

The Year 9 *Circle* program is taught in conjunction with the Wayfinder program. Although the Wayfinder program is an external resource, Bayview have been able to contextualise it specifically to their school needs and integrate into their highly successful wellbeing program and curriculum. Bayview is now in their fourth year of the ISV supported Wayfinder program and are looking to extend it across all years.

The *Circle* program supports Year 9 students to make connections to learning, to see that learning is lifelong and has purpose. Students are required to work in teams to deal with real-world problems, as they develop a stronger sense of self-worth and an understanding of their capacity to contribute positively to society, navigate challenges and build resilience.

In Year 10, the *Horizon* program looks to the future, supporting work experience and career education. Students participate in an aptitude and career test and analyse their own results which factors into work experience decisions. Students learn how to write their own resume and employment cover letters and members of the local business community participate in mock interviews with students, providing them with real-world experience.



“

It's not about the ATAR, it's about how we create human beings to go out into the world and have a positive impact.

Rhonda Browne, *Director of Community*

”

The College has developed a close relationship with the Local Learning Employment Network which supports students with industry tours, work placement and work experience. Mental health first aid is also a component of the Year 10 *Horizon* program.

Following the completion of the four stages of Bayview's wellbeing program, *Wave, Anchor, Circle* and *Horizon*, senior students have developed strong social emotional skills, resilience and self-confidence. Bayview continues to provide further opportunities for ongoing personal development through senior camps and other school-based activities.

WELLBEING ALIGNED WITH PERSONALISED LEARNING

The College is committed to a personalised approach to learning. Every student from Year 8 has an online personalised learning plan to meet their individual needs and track progress of achievement in school and in the community. Each student has a teacher mentor and regularly meets with them to set goals; discuss their plan, challenges and aspirations;

and celebrate achievements. Every student works at their own level as the College has a staged, not aged educational approach.

Electives in Years 8, 9 and 10 are multi-aged, which provides opportunities for peer modelling and coaching. This approach has significantly improved social relationships and decreased disruptive behaviours. Year 10 students seeking extension can work at Year 11 level in selected subjects and creative units of work provide subject integration and opportunities to extend lessons into the community and local environment.

In 2024 Bayview will continue to upskill all staff in delivering the wellbeing program and introduce a whole-school values-based program. In mentor classes, students will be taught how to create their own Action Management Plan to further develop positive wellbeing. Having a long-term vision, stable leadership and strong staff and student voice has enabled Bayview to develop innovative programs aligned to their vision and context, to support every student to reach their potential.



CASE STUDY FEELING VALUED, FEELING SEEN

TREETOPS MONTESSORI SCHOOL, DARLINGTON, WA



SUMMARY

Treetops is a Montessori school located in Darlington in the hills east of Perth. The wellbeing of staff and students is a key focus, and the school has participated in the Association of Independent Schools WA (AISWA) Wellbeing and Mental Health in Schools Pilot Project to embed a greater strategic focus on wellbeing. Recognising that there is always scope for improvement, and it is important not to become complacent, Treetops has utilised the 'Wellbeing Tree' method to develop their wellbeing plan and set priorities for the future.

Treetops Montessori School blends the Western Australian Curriculum with Montessori and International Baccalaureate philosophies.

Treetops prioritises a highly individualised learning focus for over 170 students from early childhood through to Year 12 in a non-comparative and non-competitive educational setting. The school's overarching commitment to wellbeing combined with a holistic, inclusive and student-centred educational environment is evident in its flexible approach to student needs.

ISA's visit to Treetops highlighted the key role that Principal Stuart Harris plays in the school's vision to build a strong Treetops community. The many opportunities to converse with staff and students provided a real sense of the school's culture and how wellbeing is embedded across the community.

INDIVIDUALISED APPROACH

Treetops offers an individualised inquiry-based model of learning, combined with direct instruction. The school's individualised approach is prioritised by small class sizes, teaching and learning support, a stimulating and engaging learning environment and a student-centred approach to meet the needs and abilities of each child. Activities are planned and targeted to provide support or extension to students as required. Timothy, Year 8, stated that the small classes at Treetops means that teachers really know every student and can help each student learn, and students feel comfortable asking for help. He also said that it was easy to make friends, 'they don't judge you, you can be yourself'.

A pro-social approach commences in the early years and sets the school's culture and tone. Students are extremely creative, use their time wisely and support peers. Across the school, warm relationships and deep respect between staff and students are highly visible and staff reported that Treetops experiences very few student behaviour issues as positive connection, communication and relationships form a strong foundation.



STUDENT AND STAFF AGENCY

Several students volunteered to be interviewed as part of ISA's Case Study. Will, Year 12, stated that he commenced at Treetops in Year 8 as he had been having a hard time at his previous school and had missed many classes. Will stated that 'at Treetops the teachers stuck by me and gave me many chances, even when I was doing silly stuff and now I am doing really well'. Samantha, Year 11, commented that at Treetops you can find your identity, be who you want to be and receive the support you need. Rhiani, Year 9, stated that teachers support student learning and will provide extra time if needed.

Teachers provide freedom to students combined with trust and responsibility. Student voice is valued and many opportunities are provided for students to have a say in school projects and events. For example, Year 1 and 2 students gave input into the new playground design.

Staff also had many positive things to say about their school community. ISA spoke to administration staff, teacher aides, specialist teachers, teachers and the leadership team and the message came through strongly that all staff felt respected, heard, valued, seen and treated as individuals. Staff retention is high as wellbeing and agency is embedded, combined with a strong sense of belonging and care.

WELLBEING

The school's natural environment, located within the trees, provides a sense of calm. Community wellbeing has always been a high priority for Treetops. In 2023 the school applied to join AISWA's Wellbeing and Mental Health in Schools Pilot Project (Project)³¹ for a greater strategic focus on wellbeing. Out of 45 school applications, only ten schools could be selected and Treetops were fortunate to be accepted into the Project.

AISWA provided funding and expertise as part of the Project and Treetops appointed a member of their leadership team as a Wellbeing Coordinator one day a week to collaborate with the other Independent schools involved. With the main aim of the Project being systemic improvement in whole-school wellbeing designed around each individual school context, regular meetings between AISWA and school-based staff were organised to build the skills and knowledge of Wellbeing Coordinators and to share understandings between schools.

AISWA's evidence-based organisational tool referred to as the 'Wellbeing Tree'³² is a method of capturing wellbeing initiatives and practices and linking these to the vision and mission of the school. From their own Wellbeing Tree, Treetops created a school wellbeing plan and set priorities for the future. As part of this process staff completed a school readiness survey and considered collaborative ideas, finding that leadership and culture were wellbeing strengths.

31 [Wellbeing and Mental Health in Schools Pilot Project \(2024–2025\). Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia](#)

32 Kirkham, J. (2023) – Envisaging a whole-school approach to wellbeing: The 'wellbeing tree'. Education Research and Perspectives, 50, pp 1–35, www.erjournal.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ERP50_Jane_Kirkham-1.pdf

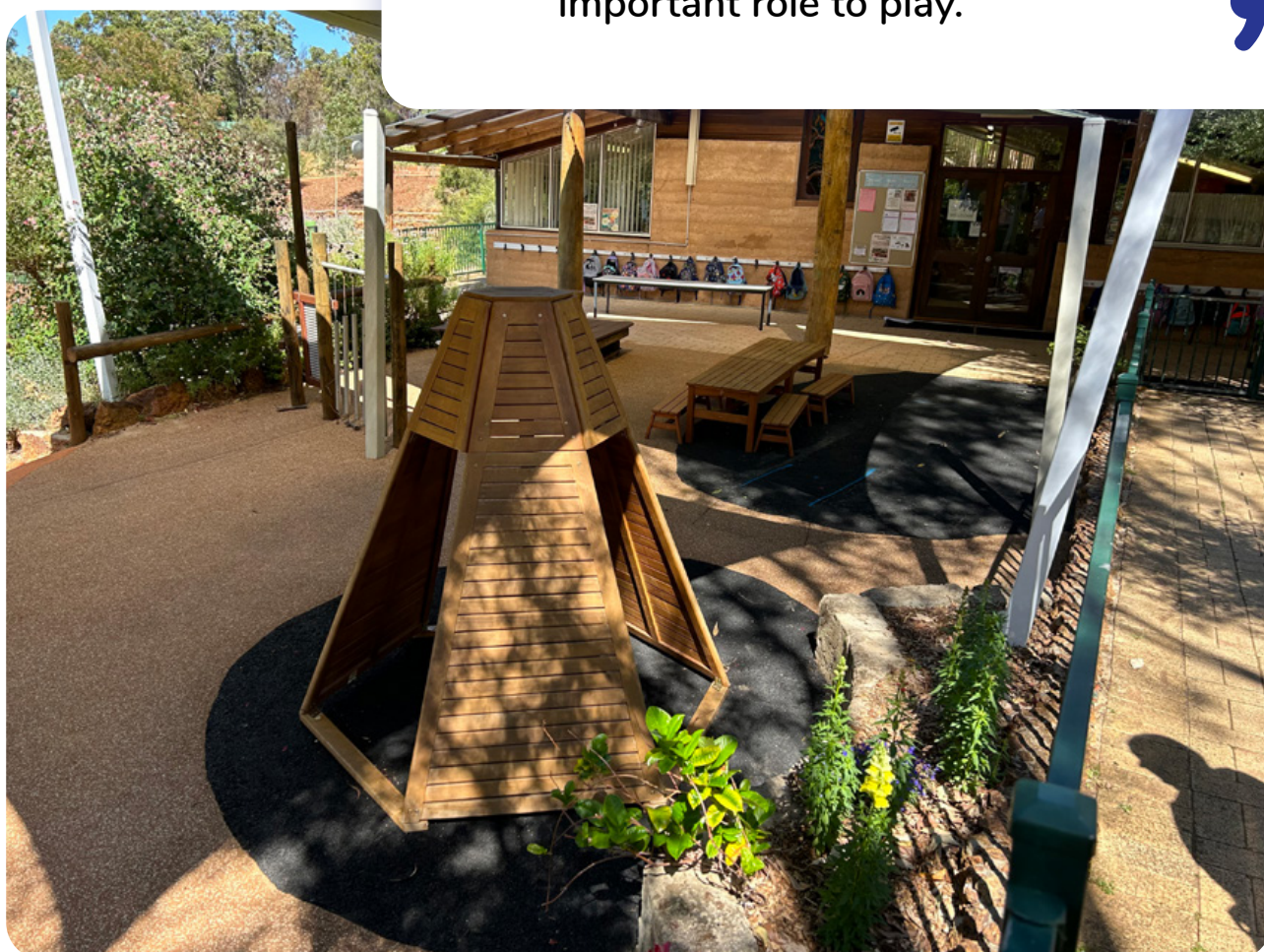


They agreed to focus on improving student voice and community wellbeing. Treetops staff also developed their own definition of school wellbeing, demonstrating staff ownership and investment in school improvement.

In addition to using an AISWA evaluation tool to assess Social and Emotional Learning programs created especially for the Project, Treetops decided to adopt The Resilience Project³³ for 2024 and onwards as this program links strongly to family and community and is their identified area for improvement. Participation in the AISWA Project has facilitated school improvement in wellbeing approaches, making these both visible and achievable.

The Treetops Case Study shows that even when school wellbeing is thriving, there is always room for improvement and no room for complacency. AISWA's Project demonstrates the value of schools working together and the importance of school context, as opposed to a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to wellbeing in schools. Although the ten schools involved in the AISWA Project used the Wellbeing Tree tool as a starting point, each school adapted it to suit their own context and wellbeing goals based on a systematic approach to school needs and evidence-informed best practice.

“ Treetops is a village, a welcoming community and everyone has an important role to play. ”



33 The Resilience Project – theresilienceproject.com.au



PRIORITY AREA 3: WORKFORCE

WORKFORCE AND INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Independent schools employ a workforce of 123,000. There are 61,000 teachers, representing more than 19 per cent of all teachers nationwide.

Australia faces a teacher supply and retention crisis, affecting all schools across all three sectors, especially in regional and remote areas. This is due to a combination of factors including:

- student teachers not completing their degrees
- declining numbers of new graduates
- early career teachers leaving the profession early
- increasing demand from a growing student population
- an aging school workforce.



The Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel 2023, *Strong beginnings*,³⁴ noted that one in five beginning teachers leave within the first three years of entering the teaching profession and that preparing teachers better for the classroom will improve teacher retention.

³⁴ [Strong Beginnings: Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel](#), Department of Education, Australian Government



Collaboration between sectors and jurisdictions is crucial to addressing workforce challenges, including the piloting and implementation of new initiatives.

Many Independent schools, like their Catholic and government counterparts, are struggling to source, recruit and retain teachers with the skill sets and experience required. Middle and senior leadership positions are also extremely difficult to fill. The 412 Independent schools and boarding schools in regional and remote areas are particularly affected by workforce shortages, and consistently report few or no applicants for teaching and administrative positions and a high staff turnover.

The turnover of principals across the sector and the number retiring is a significant workforce issue. In the absence of systemic support many Independent school leaders have additional roles and responsibilities, and report directly to their governing body on all aspects of school operations, governance risk and strategy. Whilst there are many programs being offered by AISs and the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA) to encourage, support and mentor new leaders, there are also many school leaders close to retirement age and attracting new leaders is an urgent priority.

The Review Report notes the work that is underway to address current issues but concludes that there is more that governments and school systems can do to grow and support the teaching workforce. The Panel found that the workload and expectations of teachers and school leaders has grown over time, affected by the changing economic, cultural and demographic conditions that are transforming every profession. Such demands, including change and reform, are taking a toll on the teaching workforce and undermining efforts to attract new entrants and retain those with experience, including principals.³⁵

Teaching is a stressful occupation, and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the pressure on teachers and school leaders. With the current workforce shortages, the pressures on schools have not abated. Various data sources, including the Australian Teacher Workforce Data, reveal a shifting workforce landscape.

Teachers are no longer following traditional linear career paths. Mid-career changes, declines in teacher education enrolment, early departures, and more educators transitioning into leadership roles are becoming more common.³⁶

The Independent school sector is actively engaged in identifying and promoting evidence-based strategies and initiatives to address teacher workload, attraction and retention, particularly in regional and remote areas. Independent schools and AISs are engaged in a range of individual and collective initiatives and partnerships to address this cross sectoral, national workforce crisis.

For example, the AIS NSW Teaching School Hubs program³⁷ is part of the Growing and Nurturing Educators initiative, a three-year program to develop innovative, evidence-based projects to grow and nurture Independent school educators.³⁸ The Teaching School Hubs program provides an immersive experience for Initial Teacher Education students as they undertake a Bachelor or Master's degree, providing practical experience to education trainees in Independent schools.

The primary objective of this program is to attract teacher education trainees to the Independent sector by placing them in Hub schools with dedicated, trained mentors, providing trainees with an opportunity to develop confidence and feel part of a school community. For a full school year, trainees are provided with a holistic teaching and learning experience in a highly supportive environment, in addition to their professional experience placements. The program emphasises empathy, mentorship and professionalism and contributes to educator growth and retention, especially in regional, remote and diverse school settings.

Generative AI offers the opportunities to assist in teacher workload reduction. For example Hillbrook Anglican School is exploring generative AI opportunities that will benefit students and teachers. It is developing AI approaches to reduce teacher workload and investigating the use of AI tools to support personalised learning for students to provide targeted, real-time feedback.

35 Improving Outcomes for All: Australian Government Summary Report of the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System, 2023 pp 16–17

36 Key metrics dashboard, www.aitsl.edu.au/research/australian-teacher-workforce-data

37 AISNSW Teaching School Hubs Program, www.aisnsw.edu.au/teachers-and-staff/research-and-data-in-schools/the-evidence-institute/growing-and-nurturing-educators/teaching-school-hubs

38 Growing and Nurturing Educators. The Association of Independent Schools

CASE STUDY

GROWING AND NURTURING TEACHERS

SHEARWATER, THE MULLUMBIMBY STEINER SCHOOL, NSW



SUMMARY

Shearwater, The Mullumbimby Steiner School in the Byron Bay hinterland in northern NSW, is using a new approach to attract teacher education students interested in the Steiner education philosophy. The school is a participant in AISNSW's Teaching School Hubs program, an alternative model of teacher training that provides trainee teachers with a paid immersive, mentored school-based experience.

Shearwater, The Mullumbimby Steiner School, is a 52-acre campus bordered by a creek and wildlife corridors. The school provides daily opportunities for place-based learning, fostering imagination and creativity with a strong emphasis on student agency. Shearwater offers Steiner education from 12 months (Playgroup) through to Year 12 for 670 students.

TEACHING SCHOOL HUBS PROGRAM

The Steiner philosophy requires a pedagogical approach that is well understood by teachers and with the current national workforce shortage, then Head of School James Goodlet, was finding it increasingly difficult to attract experienced Steiner teachers. When James heard about the AISNSW's newly established Teaching School Hubs program at the end of 2022, he nominated Shearwater to join.

The Teaching School Hubs program is an alternative model of teacher training that provides Initial Teacher Education students (trainees) with a paid immersive school-based experience, enabling them to gain an understanding of what it means to be a teacher in the Independent sector. The program³⁹ is specifically tailored to meet the diverse recruitment needs of Independent schools and improve teacher retention.

James has always been passionate about developing leadership capacity in others and was excited when several Shearwater teachers volunteered to be part of the AISNSW mentor program, an essential component of the Teaching School Hubs program. Two trainees, Bodi Smith and Georgia Mossop, were accepted and they became part of the inaugural program at Shearwater.

TRAINEES

Bodi was already employed as a teacher assistant at the school and in 2023 was about to start his final year of study. He was keen to be part of the Teaching School Hubs program as it meant he could be mentored by an experienced teacher and spend one day per week in the classroom, learning on the job. As Bodi was going to graduate that year he wanted to learn more about Steiner education as he knew he wanted to explore Steiner education further and hopefully seek employment in a Steiner school.

³⁹ AISNSW Teaching School Hubs Program, www.aisnsw.edu.au/teachers-and-staff/research-and-data-in-schools/the-evidence-institute/growing-and-nurturing-educators/teaching-school-hubs



Georgia was in her second year of study. She wanted to improve her confidence and saw the Teaching School Hubs program as an excellent opportunity to deepen her studies, to ask questions and have more teaching practice beyond the usual set practicum weeks. Georgia was also interested in learning more about Steiner education.

Bodi and Georgia were quickly accepted by the Shearwater community and felt a sense of belonging. They valued the opportunity to form positive relationships with students, families and staff and be part of the school's culture. When on practicums in other schools they reported they felt more pressure, did not feel a sense of belonging or did not feel safe to ask 'silly' questions, whereas through the Teaching School Hubs program, they had the opportunity to take risks and try new things, building confidence and capacity in their teaching.

As part of the Teaching School Hubs program both trainees were paid as a teacher, one day per week for the entire year, which meant less time spent trying to find other paid work and more time focused on their education degree and gaining practical experience, every week.

MENTORS

Kat Barwick, the program coordinator and trained mentor, highly values the Teaching School Hubs program's impact and its focus on trainee self-reflection. She noted the importance of carefully pairing mentor with trainee for greatest success. The Shearwater mentors completed both the AISNSW mentoring program and a Steiner-based mentoring program, so were well prepared to ensure that Bodi and Georgia were supported, were valued and had a voice in how their traineeship was progressing.

INNOVATION MEETS NEEDS

Recruiting teachers with Steiner education experience is always challenging, even more so when there is a national teacher shortage, therefore the Teaching School Hubs program is a positive step towards attracting new teachers to the Steiner philosophy. The flexibility of the Teaching School Hubs program means it is able to accommodate individual school needs and context, create robust teacher education experiences, motivate and inspire staff and build leadership capacity.

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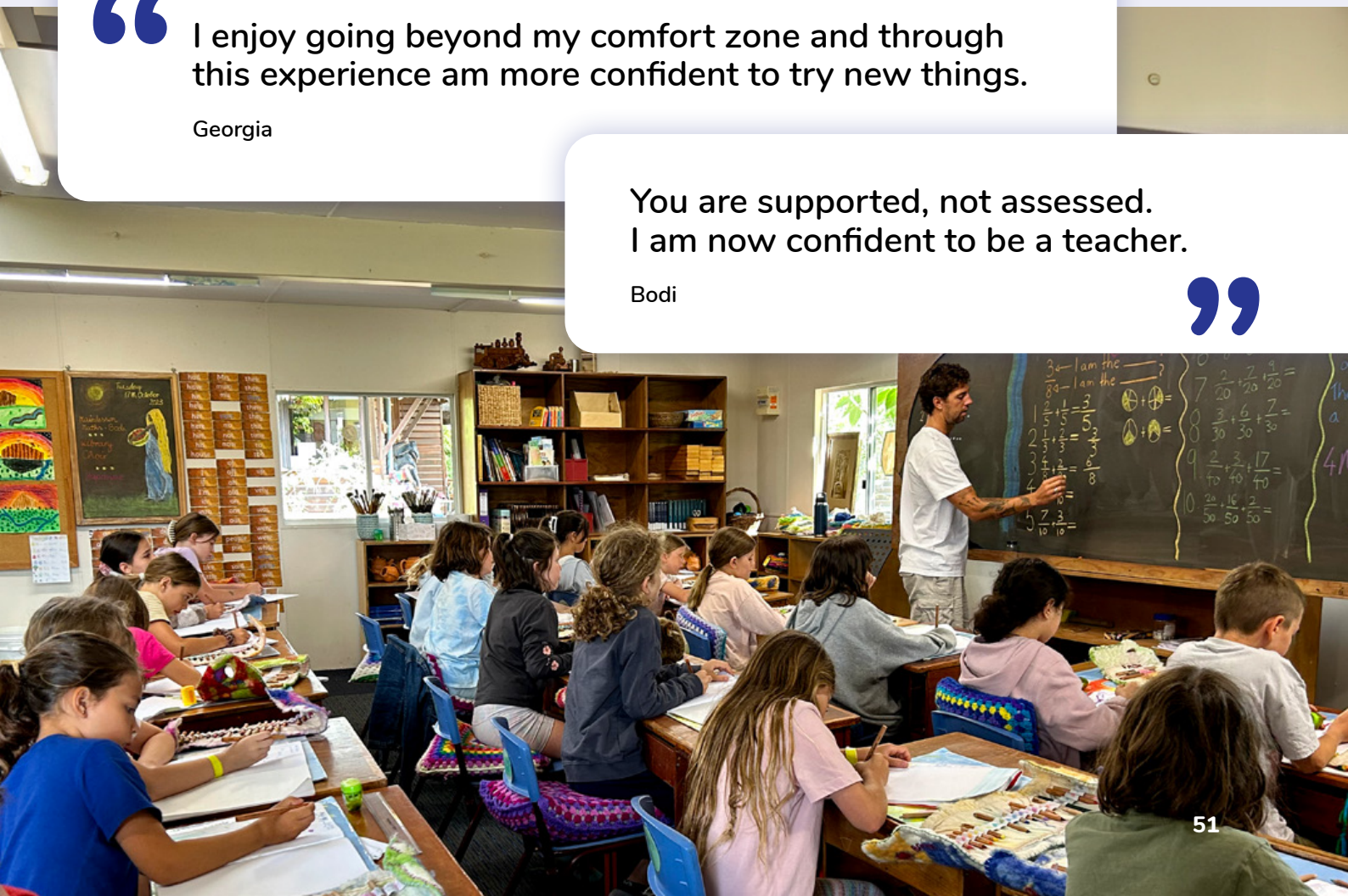
I enjoy going beyond my comfort zone and through this experience am more confident to try new things.

Georgia

You are supported, not assessed.
I am now confident to be a teacher.

Bodi

”



Students benefit as they have two teachers in the room one day per week, allowing more opportunities for personalised learning.

Trainees Bodi and Georgia have greatly valued the Teaching School Hubs program and see it as a stepping-stone to build greater confidence and success as a graduate teacher. They reported the program had fostered and guided self-reflection, supported by a collaborative, professional mentor relationship.

Shearwater's leadership team and the 2023 trainees agreed the program has substantially enhanced the teacher training experience, improved personalised student learning, and developed deep connections between trainees and students, with trainees developing a greater understanding of students with diverse needs.

When Bodi received his teacher registration in term 4, 2023, an opportunity arose when a current Shearwater teacher wanted to reduce their teaching load and he was offered a job-share teaching role. This has proven sustainable and beneficial for both Bodi and the school, with minimal disruption and impact for all concerned. Georgia will continue with her one day per week as a trainee at Shearwater in 2024 with two additional trainees commencing in the new year.

The Teaching School Hubs program has strengthened Shearwater's connection with universities, an important avenue to introduce Steiner education to initial teacher education students. Shearwater will continue with the program and engage three trainees in 2024 in partnership with AISNSW, University of New England and Charles Sturt University. At the time of ISA's visit they had 13 applications!

“ Part of the success is that Georgia is coming in to learn to be a teacher, not just be the assistant ... it is different.

Kat Barwick, [Mentor](#)

The right schools joined the program for the right reasons and they chose the right people. It is a true partnership between AISNSW, the schools and universities.

Tiffany Roos, [Director, The Evidence Institute – AISNSW](#)

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CASE STUDY

LEARNING IN A DIGITAL WORLD

HILLBROOK ANGLICAN SCHOOL, ENOGGERA, QLD



SUMMARY

Hillbrook Anglican School, located in Enoggera, Brisbane, has a strong focus on digital education and is implementing effective strategies to incorporate generative AI as a platform for innovation. Hillbrook's emphasis on teacher collaboration and support both within the school and across a wider network of schools is driving innovation in digital education.

Hillbrook Anglican School has experienced significant growth over the last five years and is at capacity in 2024 with 900 students from Years 7 to 12. As an Independent school Hillbrook has the autonomy to plan according to the needs of the Hillbrook community and adapt to change as needed. Hillbrook has an open, inclusive and collaborative environment that fosters inquiry, innovation and creativity.

Hillbrook has always had a strong focus on digital education and a personalised student approach and has made great headway in the digital education landscape. Digital literacy and technological intelligence across the school support the incorporation of generative AI as a platform for innovation.

Trust is developed between the school and parent community on the implementation of generative AI educational practice, ethical considerations, challenges and opportunities with regular communication and relevant information for each year level.

Over the past six years, Miriam Scott, Head of Digital Education, has led the development of the school's Digital Access Pass,⁴⁰ a resource influenced by student input, designed to connect and provide students with the knowledge and ethical mindset to approach generative AI with integrity and safety.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Teachers discuss privacy and data content and ensure no identifiable information is provided to generative AI tools. Miriam has been delivering staff workshops to inform teachers how generative AI can be implemented to save time and reduce workload. Hillbrook teachers do not use generative AI to create lesson plans as this is where they use their creativity and professional expertise. Instead they are exploring ways in which generative AI can reduce time spent on administrative and time-consuming repetitive tasks, not replacing teaching practices but increasing time teachers can spend to better support student learning.

UPSKILLING STAFF AND STUDENTS

Both teachers and students have been taught how to effectively use prompts and how to ask generative AI tools the right question for the greatest result and are now confident to generate their own specific prompts. Hillbrook initially established example banks for teachers and students and created online spaces where teachers could share resources, however now they are more focused on using generative AI with the greatest effect. Hillbrook's AI focus group is the result of a collaborative effort between students and teachers. This presents a great opportunity for teachers and students to work together and learn from each other.

The school also provides a series of lessons to students addressing expectations about the ethical use of generative AI as in this example for Year 12 students: youtu.be/P4givEF6BT0.

Hillbrook teachers formed an action research team focused on generative AI, comprising expertise from various subject areas. Together they explored different approaches, including adjustments to assessment and curriculum and providing input into the school's strategic direction.

40 Digital Access Pass – digitalaccesspass.com.au

Hillbrook continues to be proactive in supporting other schools, sharing what it has learnt on their generative AI journey, and providing guidance to those seeking advice. The ever-evolving nature of the digital technology landscape necessitates continuous evaluation and adaptation, therefore teachers and students require ongoing guidance and support to effectively implement generative AI, understanding what is permissible and what is not.

COLLABORATION AND INNOVATION

In term 3 2023, Miriam created a network of non-government schools across Queensland, the Qld Network of Emerging Technology (QLDNET). There are currently 32 schools across Queensland, and teachers in QLDNET meet each term to share practice, collaborate, lead practice in generative AI, and develop resources to share with schools without digital technology specialists. QLDNET is not owned by any school and their charter is 'teachers supporting teachers and schools supporting schools'.

QLDNET formed its own group using Microsoft Teams, where all members have the opportunity to take the lead to share their AI practice to support others. QLDNET sees many opportunities for generative AI to support students with personalised learning with access to tutors for any subject or learning need. However it is about more than just generative AI, as digital technology such as the metaverse continues to evolve.

Miriam is working with the AISNSW to investigate the potential of generative AI to support implementation of curriculum reform. She has presented at education events and generative AI forums and continues to openly share her learning with school leaders. Miriam encourages leaders to provide teachers with time and resources to explore new digital technologies and says, 'There are so many competing priorities in a school. One thing Hillbrook did was prioritise generative AI and make it the focus of every meeting to allow teachers to have the freedom to play and explore in school time'.

FUTURE IMPACT OF AI

Hillbrook's plans for continuing to incorporate generative AI in 2024:

- Hillbrook are exploring ways that generative AI can provide opportunities for personalised learning and assessment for students and support teacher workload. For example, this could mean teachers identifying how and if generative AI can be used for a specific assessment task. This puts control back into the teacher's hands and makes sure expectations are clear for both teachers and students, supporting consistency across subjects and year levels.
- Hillbrook includes a checkpoint for written drafts where a teacher can access the revision history of student work. Questions are raised in the drafting stage, not the final submission stage.

Generative AI can be a catalyst for change and improvement if implemented properly, leading to the next evolution of education. This change will be driven not solely by generative AI but by the conversations we have and the people involved. Our biggest takeaway from 2023 was to pause and reflect on current practice and put the focus clearly on students and new ways to improve teaching and learning.

Miriam Scott



CASE STUDY A PARADIGM SHIFT

BLUE GUM COMMUNITY SCHOOL, HACKETT, ACT



SUMMARY

Blue Gum Community School is a small community school located in Hackett, close to Mount Majura bushland. The school is highly focused on personalised learning, with an emphasis on student agency through expectations of student competency, resourcefulness, and resilience. Small class sizes and extended time with core teachers ensures students are well known to educators. Educators undertake action research and reflection which is shared regularly with colleagues.

Blue Gum is a small secular Independent school with a strong community focus, offering education for 3–16 year olds. Blue Gum adopts a responsive strengths-based approach to education, where every student can achieve success in a non-competitive environment. Its smallness is a key strength with 75 preschool places and 165 students from Kindergarten to Year 10. Principal, Sophia Williams, and founding Executive Director, Maureen Hartung, are aligned in their vision for Blue Gum to value its Australian cultural context while also connecting internationally, sharing with and learning from educators globally.

CROSS-DISCIPLINARY APPROACH

At Blue Gum, a teaching team works with each multi-age class, presenting learning ‘provocations’ as starting points for students’ deep exploration in their quest for conceptual understanding and skills development. Students’ interests, passions and questions provide the impetus to pursue meaningful research, usually within a cross-disciplinary context. In the high school, teachers broaden their subject lens beyond traditional silos, so that students not only understand discipline fundamentals, but also grasp the overlap/connections between subjects. Consequently, Blue Gum secondary students undertake ‘deep dives’, rather than skimming across the surface of knowledge.

In an interactive and respectful education environment, students are highly motivated to learn. Differentiation is supported by having two full-time educators in every class. This low student/teacher ratio attracts teachers keen to bring a fresh lens to schooling to ensure it is ‘fit for purpose’ in an ever-changing world. Every aspect of schooling, administrative or academic, is open to questioning. A simple management hierarchy ensures quick turnaround when teachers seek to road-test new ideas and adapt quickly in response, encouraging a high level of critical reflection and shared professionalism. Action research is an expectation of every educator at every level.

INDEPENDENT AND INTERDEPENDENT LEARNERS

Students are seen as competent, capable, creative, responsible, resourceful and resilient, and are given agency and negotiated choice in their learning. Current students act as ‘interpreters’ for new students as they adapt to this ‘high expectations’ approach and ways of thinking about themselves as both independent and interdependent learners.

The interplay between educators and students is also fundamental in setting a positive school culture, which supports students' ownership of their learning complemented by teachers' targeted guidance to ensure curriculum expectations are met. Students are expected to move beyond their comfort zone as they map out a personal work plan, with educators acting as 'critical friends' to invite self-reflection and ongoing improvement.

Small class sizes and extended time with a small number of core teachers ensure that each student's strengths, challenges and individual 'story' are well-known to educators. Each week, a variety of open-ended Learning Explorations invite students to pursue learning at their own level, whether on their own or by collaborating with others. Expanding the classroom out into the natural world is seen as essential for students' health and wellbeing. Regularly spending time in nature is embedded in each class's curriculum, as this offers first-hand connection and understanding of the environment and its importance in their lives.

Equally important is nurturing a strong sense of community. For example, every Friday is dubbed Community Day for primary school students, with students assigned to vertical groups across classes for each term, developing positive relationships

across age groups while undertaking a venture together. Shared experiences may include kitchen garden, community cooking, sport or exploring the nearby bushland of Mt Majura.

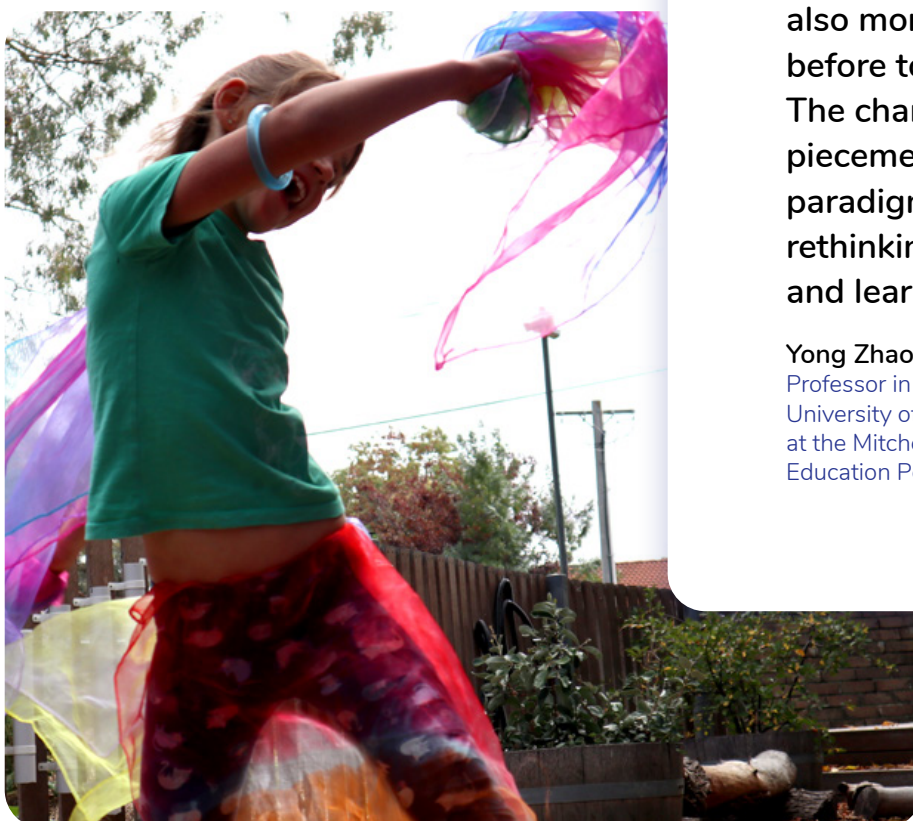
While the school day is 9am to 3pm, classrooms are open from 8.30am. This encourages students to maximise their learning time, or to attend intensive small group workshops targeting additional support or extension. Metacognition is made visible so that students gain an understanding of their optimal personal learning style. Some students might start their weekly program by tackling their most challenging areas first, and seeking assistance from educators or peers, saving their preferred endeavours to savour later in the week. Others opt to reverse this approach. With two educators in each classroom, one can work across the room, while the other works with small groups in direct teaching workshops that provide targeted, intensive support. Students acknowledge their own strengths and challenges and see their class community as a resource to draw on, and contribute to, rather than compete against. Their goals focus on achieving their personal best and continuous improvement.



PERSONALISED LEARNING AND MONITORING

At Blue Gum, each student's progress is carefully monitored by their educational team. They track each student's unique progression, appreciating that they may be at one year level in one strand of a Learning Area and at a different year level in another. Each student's learning profile is continually updated so that progress and development are tracked, and educators can see what support or extension has been provided or is needed. Student portfolios are compiled progressively across the year, with each student contributing annotations and self-reflection on their learning process, for example, their growth across the year and the strategies that were effective for them; challenges they faced and how they overcame them; and the goals they wish to set for the following year. Students are active protagonists in their learning; their voice and input are visible and have a tangible impact on the direction of their research.

While primary school classes pursue collective research investigations, high school students identify personal research questions that arise for them while exploring the fundamentals of different disciplines or bodies of knowledge. Teachers share their expertise and passions in a wide variety of ways to distil the important questions that emerge for students, individually or collectively, capitalising on their curiosity as the motivation for further meaningful research.



Blue Gum is a place of wonder and curiosity, a place where learning is a richly creative and ever-changing hands-on pursuit. Students analyse their learning endeavours using the Australian Curriculum as one reference point; a process that invariably highlights the breadth and depth of their learning, together with the interconnected nature of knowledge, for example, how mathematics relates to social sciences, or how art relates to life.

At Blue Gum, educators are not looking for an educational recipe. They use action research and reflection to question different possibilities through a continuous cycle of evolution and analysis, with findings shared at an annual celebration with colleagues. The evidence base for practice is rooted in the reality of everyday schooling and working with students, all of whom are unique. For students, deep dives into knowledge are balanced with research into personally driven questions, an approach that allows Blue Gum to achieve the best of both worlds.

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It is apparent that the traditional teacher-centred pedagogy needs to be changed. It is also more feasible than ever before to make the change. The change is more than piecemeal tinkering. It is a paradigm shift, a complete rethinking of how teaching and learning are carried out.

Yong Zhao, Foundation Distinguished Professor in the School of Education at the University of Kansas. Professorial fellow at the Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy, Victoria University.

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5

SUPPORTING NATIONAL REFORM





All sectors of education are committed to improving the educational outcomes of all Australian students, including those from equity cohorts. All school sectors therefore seek a corresponding commitment from governments to provide resources that support the implementation of agreed reform initiatives.

The Case Studies outlined in this report highlight the significant contribution to innovation and reform made by the Independent sector, including the critical role played by state and territory AISs.

The challenge of delivering national reform is significant for individual Independent schools. Many of these schools serve students experiencing high levels of disadvantage, including students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, students with disabilities, and students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Supporting these students requires skilled staff, customised facilities, and partnerships with support services.

In the non-government school sector, the provision of funding to non-government representative bodies (NGRBs) has delivered an extremely efficient mechanism to support implementation of specific reform initiatives.

NGRBs have an excellent understanding of the operating environment and needs of schools in their jurisdiction and use this to develop programs and supports that enable them to meet government priorities and provide effective evaluation and measurement.

Individual Independent schools benefit from the significant expertise and administrative supports that AISs can provide to assist them in adapting and participating in reform. They will rely heavily on their state or territory AIS for student-focused expertise, support, guidance and resources to implement the reform directions of the BFSa.

With the appropriate level of support from governments, the AISs will continue to provide the necessary support and guidance to their member schools to enable them to meet Australian Government reform requirements.

Understanding, costing, and supporting the implementation of any new initiative for each school, each sector, and each jurisdiction is a critical element for successful implementation of the BFSa.

APPENDIX

The ISA submission to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System included the following recommendations:

Improving student outcomes – including for students most at risk of falling behind

- Any measures to address barriers for the identified priority cohorts must be cross-sectoral so that there is parity and equitable access to reforms and initiatives for students.
- Any targets in the NSRA must be reasonable and achievable for all schools and sectors and should build on existing evidence. For this reason, ISA recommends a separate process to this Review.
- Any reporting against targets to measure the outcomes of schooling in relation to the next NSRA should not impose an unreasonable burden on schools and/or result in a highly data driven approach to education.
- The primary focus should be on what supports schools put in place to support students, more than targets.

Improving student mental health and wellbeing

- Independent schools would welcome an explicit focus on student, staff and school leaders' mental health and wellbeing in the next NSRA accompanied by increased resources to meet wellbeing and mental health challenges, particularly:
 - training and time to select and implement safe and supportive responses to protect and support wellbeing and respond to students at risk
 - increased access to, and cooperation with, specialised services for students, staff and school leaders.
- The Review should consider the value and feasibility of the inclusion of a wellbeing target in the next NSRA as it is not possible to define optimal wellbeing, which makes including a wellbeing target in the NSRA highly problematic.

Our current and future teachers

- ISA recommends that the Review note and support the current work underway in the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan and Initial Teacher Education processes and limit recommendations regarding teachers to those that sit outside current work streams.

Collecting data to inform decision making and boost student outcomes

- The Review should consider the possible targeting of available evaluation measures to specific reforms to better align with, and measure, the intent of the reforms.
- There must be a compelling rationale and evidence base for the collection of any new data, as well as a clearly articulated rationale for the ways in which data will be used to improve student experience and outcomes.
- Any new data collections must take into account the administrative and resourcing burden on individual schools, sectors and jurisdictions.

Funding transparency and accountability

- The Review should recognise that the Schooling Resource Standard funding model was based on the principles of subsidiarity and flexibility, with the acknowledgement that schools are best placed to know and meet the needs of their students.
- The Review should acknowledge that schools are best placed to know and to meet the needs of their students, and therefore reporting at the individual school level against specific loadings is not appropriate.

